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*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 69 No. 3 (July 2018): 625-627. [DOI](#). This article is © Cambridge University Press and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Cambridge University Press does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Cambridge University Press.

# Book Review of *Maximus the Confessor. Jesus Christ and the transfiguration of the world*, By Paul M. Blowers

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Paul Blowers is an established authority on St Maximus the Confessor and this *tour de force* of a book will only serve to cement his amply deserved reputation still further. The book opens with an excellent general overview of Maximus' own historical and theological context (chs i–ii). The central portion of the book considers the 'cosmic landscapes' of Maximus' thought (chs iii–v) and goes on to discuss Maximus' vision for a transfigured creation (chs vi–viii). The closing chapter (ch. ix) considers Maximus' afterlife in East and West while an epilogue presents Maximus as a 'confessor for East, West, and global south'. The book falls into Oxford University Press's *Christian Theology in Context* series. Blowers has taken this contextual dimension very seriously not only in terms of the Maximus' own contexts and reception but also, and especially,

in terms of the scholarly literature surrounding all the various aspects of Maximus treated in this volume. Indeed, Blowers engages with secondary literature to such an unusually comprehensive extent that this book also serves as an overview of the history and current state of Maximus scholarship.

Blowers deals with the fascinating and still open question of the veracity of the Greek as opposed to the Syriac *Life* of Maximus with great skill and perspicuity. While scarcely condoning all the excesses and distortions of the Syriac *Life* (which constitutes a thoroughly scurrilous account of Maximus' origins and theological predilections), Blowers sees great merit in its account of a Palestinian provenance – as opposed to the Constantinopolitan origin attested in the rather more stylised Greek *Life*.

As for Maximus' theological achievement, Blowers is absolutely right to assert that Maximus was far more than a sophisticated compiler or synthesiser. Maximus did indeed produce a monumental synthesis of the preceding tradition but did so in a tremendously creative fashion fully addressing the theological and ecclesiastical needs and issues of his own time. Blowers takes issue with Averil Cameron's profile of Maximus as a conservative proto-scholastic whose literary *corpus* (like that of John of Dasmascus a century later) was conceived as a secure and sufficient system of knowledge designed to safeguard and preserve Byzantine civilisation from exterior assault and internal challenges. While not denying the scholastic dimension to Maximus' *oeuvre*, Blowers finds that such a portrait severely downplays Maximus' monastic and ecclesiastical involvements. Notably it risks overlooking 'Maximus' role as a spiritual pedagogue deeply rooted in a monastic tradition of charismatic wisdom'. This is a theme that Blowers has already explored in his *Exegesis and spiritual pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor: an investigation of the Quaestiones ad Thalassium* (Notre Dame 1991). Blowers is similarly sceptical of Polymnia Athanassiadi's portrait of Maximus as one of the last standard-bearers of authentic Hellenism, a genuine Platonic mystic resistant to the growing intellectual intolerance of his day.

Blowers has a fine grasp of Maximus' theological inheritance in the shape of figures such as Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Evagrius, (pseudo-) Macarius and (pseudo-) Dionysius. He treats Maximus' use of these sources with subtlety, invariably highlighting the creativity and, where necessary, critique inherent in such instances of reception. He is also very sensitive to Maximus' lived monastic context. Nothing in Maximus is merely abstract but all is to be understood within an overarching vision of repentance and redemption. Blowers dismisses the suggestion of Philip Booth that Maximus moved from an inherited ascetic ambivalence towards the sacraments and church hierarchy to a more obviously eucharistic and ecclesiastical theology somewhere between the *Commentary on the Lord's Prayer* and the *Mystagogy*. Blowers rightly points out that such an account not only misrepresents the earlier ascetic tradition but also fails to account for Maximus' sympathies for writers such as (pseudo-) Macarius and Mark the Monk who attacked non- or anti-sacramental early monastic initiatives such as the Messalian or Euchite tendency. Blowers goes on to draw on the work of Alexander Golitzin to demonstrate the specifically monastic character of Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical hierarchy*, a work that Booth had characterised as an episcopal product designed principally to uphold hierarchy within in the Church. Far from marking a shift away from Dionysius, Maximus' *Mystagogy* in fact reaffirms, Blowers argues, the 'ascetic-liturgical-sacramental' vision of the Areopagite.

One of the great achievements of this book is that it highlights the sheer coherence of Maximus' work. Everything Maximus writes and does ties up: from ascetic works to biblical exegesis, interpretation of the Fathers, and Christological controversy. In particular, Blowers sees Maximus' work as oriented around a 'cosmo-politeian' world view, that is 'a contemplative and ascetical vision of the participation of all created beings in the novel *politeia*, or reordered existence, inaugurated by Christ's 'new thenadric energy'. Blowers also draws on Hans Urs von Balthasar to produce a 'theo-dramatic' reading of Maximus, reading Maximus as a skilful

dramaturge vividly depicting the vast movements of creation and incarnation, fall and redemption. And this drama is always 'now and not yet': 'Thus reality here and now must also be read as a complex drama still moving towards a resolution which, though already "finalized" in Jesus Christ, continues to unfold the full effects of his work in the horizon of the Church and the cosmos.'

Blowers's account of the Maximian legacy is deft and comprehensive. He is particularly good on the use of Maximus in the later Byzantine and modern Orthodox tradition: in the controversies surrounding the *filioque*, in Palamas, the Slavophiles, Soloviev, Bulgakov and others. He also touches on the relatively spare reception of Maximus in the Latin West, focusing on John Scotus Eriugena. He tends to view Maximus as broadly pre-Palamite while casting doubts on the attempts of Jean-Michel Garrigues and others to retrieve Maximus as a proto-Thomist. Blowers ends with a brief consideration of Maximus' standing as a truly ecumenical theologian, one who defended his universal theological vision without fear or favour, without prejudice or ulterior motive. A theologian 'betwixt and between' East, West and South, an inspiration for all those struggling to translate and live out the faith in new and often difficult contexts.

I confess that I find little to criticise in this book. On occasion the sheer depth and extent of engagement with secondary sources can be a little wearying: one sometime feels as though the author is wading through mud as he strives to account for as much as he possibly can of the vast acreage of Maximus scholarship. That said, there is no doubt that this book offers not only a splendid overview of Maximus in context and Maximus studies in general, but also offers up a wonderfully fresh re-reading and re-telling of Maximus by a seasoned master.